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ABSTRACT

As many as 40% of older people in the United States live long enough to become great-grandparents, yet little is known about the content of this role within the American kinship system. Great-grandparents (N=20) living in the South responded to a depth anthropological interview which explored their perceptions of great-grandparenthood as a kinship role as well as its social and emotional significance in their daily lives. Preliminary statements about the great-grandparent role resulted: grandparenthood provides the role model for great-grandparents; people relate to the small children in the same way they did their grandchildren, but the sense of obligation is much less binding; and great-grandparenthood is not a primary kinship role. It is important mainly for its emotional significance since most great-grandparents are not involved in the daily lives of their great-grandchildren. The results indicate that while older people value their descendants as evidence of family continuity, relationships with their own adult children are still of primary importance emotionally and socially. (Author/AG)

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Older People's Perceptions of Great-grandparenthood

by

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Abstract

As many as 40% of older people in the United States live long enough to become great-grandparents, yet little is known about the content of this role within the American kinship system. Twenty great-grandparents living in North Carolina responded to a depth anthropological interview. The interview explored their perceptions of great-grandparenthood as a kinship role as well as its social and emotional significance in their daily lives. Two preliminary statements about the great-grandparent role resulted:

- 1) Grandparenthood provides the role model for great-grandparents. People relate to the small children in the the same way they did their grandchildren, but the sense of obligation is much less binding.
- 2) Great-grandparenthood is not a primary kinship role. It is important mainly for its emotional significance. For various reasons, most great-grandparents are not involved in the daily lives of their great-grandchildren. The paper's conclusion focuses on the implications for the social life of older people of increasingly prevalent four and five generation families.

Older People's Perceptions of Great-grandparenthood

Great-grandparents are no longer a rarity. As many as 40% of older people in the United States are living long enough to become great-grandparent. (Riley and Foner, 1968). Families with four and five living generations are becoming the norm (Neugarten, 1975), yet scant attention has been focused on the role of great-grandparent with regard to its significance to the older adult. In 1975, Jerome Kaplan pointed out the need for more qualitative information about evolving family relations in four- and five-generation families. There has been little added to the literature since then. Troll, Miller, and Atchely (1979) reiterate, "...we know very little about the psychological and sociological consequences of having a four generation family, particularly in terms of intergenerational relationships...." This present paper reports on a pilot research project examining the relevance of great-grandparenthood in the daily emotional and social life of older people.

Inspiration for this research came in part from an earlier anthropological study I conducted of the informal support networks of older people (Wentowski, 1981). The focus of that research was not directly on great-grandparenthood, but thirteen of the fifty people interviewed were great-grandparents. Two preliminary statements about the great-grandparent role can be gleaned from their volunteered comments: 1) Grandparenthood provides the role model for great-grandparents. Emotional responses to an additional generation are similar to those reported for grandparents but the sense of obligation

is much less binding for the great-grandparent; and 2) great-grandparenthood is not a primary kinship role. The informants thought of themselves as related through the middle two generations rather than as linked directly with great-grandchildren. Both a literature search and further research were necessary to confirm these statements as generalizations.

Since the literature about four-generation families is so sparse, we must turn to the literature about three-generation families to support these initial findings. Studies (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Boyd, 1969; Robertson 1976) have found wide variation in the significance grandparenthood has for older people. For many it appears to have more emotional than social value. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) found that the prime significance of grandparenthood was reported to be biological renewal and/or continuity--seeing oneself and one's family extended into the future.

When contact between grandparents and grandchildren is frequent, it is usually arranged by the middle generation. Members of the middle generation, especially women, serve as a lineage bridge (Hill et. al., 1970; Adams, 1968), linking grandparents to grandchildren. The middle generation usually decides how much interaction to have and how much value to place upon the grandparents.

A new research project was designed with the specific objective of obtaining an in-depth perspective from a small number of great-grandparents about their role. The aim was to concentrate intensively on the cultural content, that is, the norms and meanings these elders assign to the great-grandparent role. This information could be used to test the proposed hypotheses, which could later be further tested on larger samples of great-grandparents. The study explored four lines of inquiry: 1) the emotional significance of

great-grandparenthood; 2) the perceived similarity between grandparenthood and great-grandparenthood; 3) the type and frequency of interaction between great-grandchildren and great-grandparents; and, 4) the great-grandparents' perceptions of their responsibilities toward their great-grandchildren.

Methods

The Study Sample

The 20 elders who participated in the study are residents of a medium-sized city (population about 160,000) in North Carolina. The great-grandparents ranged in age from 66 to 96 with the average age being 86. The highest number of great-grandchildren reported was 14, the lowest 2. All but one of the people interviewed were women. This bias towards women may be due in part to the way participants were selected, but it also reflects the fact that the majority of people who reach this advanced age group are female. There was one married couple in the sample. The rest were widowed or single. All but one were white. All but two are middle- to upper-income and have adequate incomes for their retirement. The two women with the lowest incomes are still working full-time as nurses' assistants at a retirement complex. They were also the youngest (66 and 71) great-grandparents in the study.

Participants did not constitute a probability sample. However, they were deliberately selected to form two comparison groups--retirement community residents compared to those still living at home.

Fourteen participants live in an age-segregated retirement community run by a religious denomination. Most of the residents live in their own small apartments, but the community also has a skilled care

unit for very ill residents. The social services director of the retirement community set up interviews with the residents based on her knowledge of which were great-grandparents and which were functionally capable of being interviewed.

Three of the six participants living at home had been in the earlier study I had conducted and were recontacted for this study. The other three were drawn from different contexts. One was the grandmother of a personal friend and two were the nurses' assistants mentioned above.

Research Instrument and Procedures

During the winter of 1980, I administered an in-depth questionnaire to 20 informants. Questions were open-ended and informants were encouraged to talk as freely as possible on the topics. This open-ended format elicited the elders' own perceptions while intruding the researcher's as little as possible. As with most open-ended interviews, digressions from the original questions revealed a great deal of information. Notes were taken while informants talked. After the interview, a record was made of any pertinent observations about the willingness of the person to respond, the person's emotional reaction to a topic, the presence of others during the interview, and the person's non-verbal behavior, if at odds with what was being expressed.

The interview collected four types of evidence about the meaning of great-grandparenthood to these elders: 1) The initial questions determined the extent of knowledge that elders have about great-grandchildren. They were asked their great-grandchildren's names, ages, birth order, and birth dates. This not only provided demographic information but also served as an indicator of the relevance of great-grandchildren in their lives. 2) Several questions assessed the

nature and frequency of the contact between great-grandparents and great-grandchildren. 3) Other questions obtained expressed norms and expectations about the degree of responsibility that elders feel for their great-grandchildren. The informants were asked directly what kinds of things they did regularly for great-grandchildren. They were also asked to compare their role as grandparent to that of great-grandparent. Their responses provided valuable information about the similarities and differences between the two roles. 4) Information about the linkages between generations was obtained by making careful note of the manner in which informants described their relationships with the younger generations of the family, particularly the kinship terminology they used.

The Emotional Significance of Great-grandparenthood

Being a great-grandparent is a positive experience for these people. Great-grandparents get direct pleasure from being with the great-grandchildren during visits. They also derive pleasure from having great-grandchildren as evidence of family continuity and a long life. As will be seen, these derivative pleasures assume an increasing importance in the great-grandparent experience.

These elders often mentioned the direct pleasure of having great-grandchildren come to visit: "I enjoy them coming to see me and hearing from them." "I just enjoy them being around, seeing their laughter." One great-grandmother appreciated the chance to be in contact with young children because of their expressions of non-judgmental affection. She said, "Young children don't think about age in the same way as grown-ups do. They love you anyway. Even if you are old, they don't notice. If they did notice, they would say so."

Great-grandchildren are tangible evidence of family continuity,

which takes on an increasing importance as people get older. The great-grandparents interviewed had exact knowledge of the numbers, ages, and locations of their great-grandchildren. They take great pride in the numbers of great-grandchildren, with more being better. Elders had frequently taken charge of keeping records of family descent. They did this through record-keeping devices such as albums and bibles and, in some cases, detailed genealogies. Photographs of all the generations frequently covered every available surface of their small apartments. These devices record family history and bind the generations together.

People reported great pleasure at receiving the news of the births of their first great-grandchildren: "It was a wonderful feeling." "I was so happy and thankful that my family now has another generation." "There's just more children to love. If anything with great-grandchildren, the love gets deeper because as time goes on, your family means more and more." They identified with the feelings of the younger generations: "I know how their mommas and pappas felt to bring forth a perfect new life," or, "I was so happy for my daughter becoming a grandmother." There was also a sense of astonishment that grandchildren now had children: "It was really unbelievable that my granddaughter, who was just 19, had a little boy of her own."

Another aspect of this enjoyment of family continuity was tracing the patterns of inheritance of family physical and personality traits. As one woman put it, "I enjoy watching their little personalities and trying to figure out their relationship with their ancestors." Also prevalent was a sense of pleasure over hearing about the development of great-grandchildren. "I enjoy hearing how they are progressing." "I'm proud of all of them. I'm interested in their educations and which ones are getting married." Said another, "It's hard to describe. It's the joy of learning their personalities and being able to see them grow."

These comments reflect the emotional significance of family rather than the importance of relationships with specific great-grandchildren. This aspect of the great-grandparent role was mentioned as frequently as the importance of actual contact. While intimate daily contact is not the norm, these great-grandparents derive tremendous emotional satisfaction from evidence of family continuity.

However, as the number of intervening generations increases, people also have a sense of increasing distance between generations. This lineal distance between the youngest and oldest generations is expressed in various ways, mostly as a feeling of remoteness from the youngest generation. One woman commented, "The grandchildren were a little bit closer. There's another generation in there between me and the great-grandchildren. The grandchildren thought of me as a parent. I got to work with them when they were young. I helped raise them."

The language, or kinship terminology, used to describe the relationships also reflects this distance. For example, while people usually referred to the youngest generation as "my great-grandchildren" they were equally likely to describe them as "my daughter's grandchildren," or "my grandson's little boy," showing that they think of the relationship in terms of the connections to the middle generations. As will be seen, the mediated nature of the relationship is also reflected in visiting patterns and degree of responsibility great-grandparents assume towards their great-grandchildren.

Grandparenthood as a Role Model for Great-grandparents

Perhaps the most obvious role on which to base one's identity as a great-grandparent is that of grandparent. None of these elderly people had themselves had great-grandparents who could serve as role models. Older people's memories about the differences between their activities

in these two roles is a fruitful source of information. The great-grandparents were asked specifically if they perceived any differences between the roles of grandparent and great-grandparent. In response to this line of questioning, many people claimed initially that they could see no difference. But as they elaborated on the question, their responses showed that they do actually perceive a difference between the roles. The response of the oldest great-grandmother (96) shows the basic similarity and acknowledges the differences, "There isn't any difference." Then she went on in the same breath to say to say about her grandchildren, "When your're a grandparent you love 'em, you're glad to have them come, you fix 'em food, do things for 'em because they're precious to you. When your're a great-grandparent, you're older and you can't do as much. It's different." She recalled how one of her grandsons had lived with her a year while finishing high school. Such an arrangement would be impossible now, because she is dependent herself and lives in the household of her daughter.

Most people's face-to-face interactions with great-grandchildren are similar to those they had with grandchildren. There are, however, important differences in amount of contact and responsibilities for great-grandchildren.

Visiting and Interaction Patterns

Direct contact through visiting is by far the most important way great-grandparents have of staying in touch with their great-grandchildren. Elders mentioned that visiting was their main way of knowing the children and keeping abreast of their growth and development. While most great-grandparents have at least enough contact to know their great-grandchildren as individuals, the amount of this contact is often not great. Factors such as declining

health, decreased living space, and family mobility affect the amount of this contact.

When great-grandchildren do come to visit, great-grandparents indulge them with expressions of affection and treats and gifts. As one woman reported, "You do with them what you usually do with small children. You want to hold them in you lap and get hugs and kisses. You offer them cookies or candy to eat, if their parents will let you."

Generally, visits between great-grandparents and great-grandchildren are arranged by someone from the middle generations. These visits are of two types: family rituals and personal visits.

Once or twice a year, family rituals bring all generations of the family together. Family rituals occur on holidays the family has chosen to commemorate, for instance, Mother's Day, Christmas, July Fourth, or a birthday or anniversary. There may be 50 to 70 people present, hardly affording an opportunity for intimate contact between participants. It is common for elders to see both local and more distant great-grandchildren mostly on these holidays.

Local great-grandchildren are somewhat more likely to come for personal visits in the company of their grandparents or parents. These visits are usually short, one or two hours long. This may be because the adults bringing the young children are aware that a few hours in the presence of small children is very wearing for people in their 70's and 80's. Said one candid great-grandmother, "I wouldn't enjoy their staying too long. You can enjoy them while you have them but it's nice when they go home."

This limited degree of involvement is related to the elders' own aging crises. Their preoccupations with declining physical health makes it difficult to focus on the needs of young children. Several women

noted that they could no longer play actively with the great-grandchildren because of health problems or lack of energy. One woman, who suffers from dizzy spells said, "I wouldn't trust myself to hold an infant any more."

Even when they have the strength, they may be coping with other problems which prevent their being involved with children. The youngest great-grandmother (66) still holds a fulltime job as a nurse's assistant and has an ailing husband. She says about the great-grandchildren, "They come over for a little while, but then they start getting on my husband's nerves. He's sick you know, and doesn't have much tolerance."

Others pointed out that their shrinking physical space has made it difficult to accommodate the sleep and exercise needs of young children. Great-grandparents often live in cramped two or three room apartments, having given up spacious homes of earlier decades. Small children cannot be confined in this way very long. As one great-grandmother put it, "I'm so glad to have them visit, but they never stay long. They're very young, you know, and their parents have a hard time getting them to sit still. I keep books here for them and a jar of candy but this only keeps them busy for a little while." Instead of sponsoring large family rituals in their own homes, the older people have passed on the responsibility to younger family members, usually daughters or daughters-in-law. Remarked one woman, "I used to have them all over for dinner every Sunday, but those days are long gone."

Distance is another major factor influencing the amount of contact. People see great-grandchildren living a half hour's drive away or less with much greater frequency than those living farther. As can be seen in Table 1, great-grandparents see local sets of great-grandchildren (children within the same family) with more frequency than those living

at a great distance. For great-grandchildren living more than one half hour's drive away, the norm is one or two times a year, usually at family rituals.

Table 1 goes about here

The most involved great-grandmother, one of the nurse's aides, has eight sets of great-grandchildren, all living within five minutes' drive from her. Her married daughters live next door to her, and she sees the children when they come to visit her daughter. The oldest great-grandmother lives in her daughter's household and sees her local great-grandchildren several times a week. She also has great-grandchildren in Denmark whom she has never seen.

When the bond between the oldest and intervening generations is strong, problems of distance and inconvenience can be overcome. In one instance, an 84-year-old wheel-chair bound woman who lives in the nursing unit of the retirement complex reported seeing her local great-grandchildren every week. This was confirmed by the nurses in the unit. Her granddaughters-in-law make a special effort to bring the children to visit her in her room. Considering the difficulties of bringing small children into such a setting, this represents an extraordinary family commitment.

When grandchildren have moved following the dictates of their jobs, they and their young families are removed from the immediate vicinity of elderly relatives. However, even great geographic distance does not preclude contact if the relationships are strong. One of the great-grandmothers, a nurses' assistant, mentioned having the freedom to visit her family in Florida, where her children, grandchildren, and

Table 1

Frequency of Contact with Local and Non-local Sets^a of Great-grandchildren

Distance	# of reported sets	Has never seen	Frequency--Number of Yearly Visits			
			1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or 6 times	More than 6 times
Local						
1/2 hrs drive	21		1	4	2	14 ^b
Non-local						
1/2 hrs drive	47	5	26	13	3	
Totals	68	5	27	17	5	14

^aSets are children in the same family.

^bEight of these fourteen sets are related to the same great-grandmother.

great-grandchildren all live. Anytime she feels like it, "I've got somebody to go see. If I get lonesome at home, I can take off and go down there." She goes there for as long as six months at a time, supporting herself through temporary positions.

Visiting patterns may even vary within the same family according to the strength of specific relationships. For instance, some older people reported receiving more frequent visits from a "favorite" grandchild and his/her family. Such a grandchild's family may be seen more frequently than the families of grandchildren who live closer but have a less strong bond.

In summary, great-grandparents report responding to their young great-grandchildren in face-to-face interactions in the same way they did to grandchildren. On the whole, they see great-grandchildren far less than they did grandchildren. When the ties to the middle generations are strong, a definite effort is made to keep the oldest generation in touch with the youngest. Visits are nearly always sponsored by the middle two generations.

Perceptions of Responsibility Toward Great-grandchildren

Great-grandparents have very limited direct responsibility for great-grandchildren, compared to what they had for their grandchildren. Three-quarters of those interviewed reported having had grandchildren for long visits without their parents, babysitting with grandchildren, or caring for them full-time while parents worked. A few had even raised one or more of their grandchildren. None of these people are able to be involved with great-grandchildren in the same way. None are involved in the primary physical care of the children; they are not usually asked to perform these tasks by the middle generation.

A few did express a desire to babysit but had not been asked to do

so. There was a basic ambivalence here; most were relieved not to have the responsibility, but liked to know they could be trusted. Said one still-capable woman who had not been asked to care for her great-grandchildren, "I haven't had the pleasure of keeping the great-grandchildren. I don't know whether the children's parents trust me or not." A couple of people noted that they thought the children's parents were just being thoughtful in not burdening them with childcare: "Besides, there are plenty of other people to ask." "Other people take care of this now." Most mentioned they would be very willing to help in an emergency. In fact many expressed a desire "to help out in any way I could if I were asked." Several mentioned that they could provide monetary assistance, if it came to that. However, none had actually needed to help in this way.

Gift-giving is one of the few areas in which great-grandparents feel any obligation. The practice serves as a means of staying visible in the lives of great-grandchildren. Most elders give gifts to great-grandchildren twice a year, once on birthdays and again at a major holiday, such as Christmas. However, some have cut back to birthdays only or Christmas only. Often these gifts consist of money sent in a card, and the parents buy the gift. Informants said they do not have the energy to shop, and besides, they do not know what modern children need. Most stress that it seems appropriate to send gifts to very small children: "The little children appreciate it the most."

When asked what they expected in return, elders wanted only expressions of affection and acknowledgment of the gifts they had sent. They do not expect gifts in return although they prize cards and thank-you letters and blame the parents of the children who do not respond. The oldest great-grandmother, 96, summed it up very nicely: "I'm not crazy about anything given to me (gifts). I don't want them

(younger family members) to spend too much on me. Older people like to be noticed and respected. It's good their parents (parents of the great-grandchildren) train them this way. I don't need that much now. I just want love and to be paid attention to." Another responded, "Just love, that's all I want. I like it when the little ones throw their arms around my neck and say, 'I love you.'" These simple displays of affection were quite important to these great-grandparents and the only expectations they had of their great-grandchildren, most of whom were still very young children.

Discussion

The information collected from these 20 people was consistent with the original two statements:

1) Grandparenthood is the role model for great-grandparenthood with some significant variations. Great-grandparents respond to small great-grandchildren with indulgence and love. Their involvement is limited by their diminished physical strength. Great-grandparents do not expect to be responsible for the care of the great-grandchildren. This is partly because there are two intermediate generations to take over this role. For most great-grandparents, responsibility towards great-grandchildren is limited to giving gifts a few times a year.

2) Great-grandparenthood is not a primary kinship role. Older people depend on their links with the middle two generations to bind them to their great-grandchildren. The middle two generations form a lineage bridge. Kinship terminology also shows that older people think of themselves mainly as parents and grandparents. Direct social involvement with great-grandchildren is limited. There was not a single great-grandparent in this research who had developed a separate relationship with a great-grandchild that was not in some way mediated

by the middle two generations. The few great-grandmothers who arranged outings for the children were always accompanied by an adult from the middle generations.

The frequency of contact with great-grandchildren in daily life depends on the strength of the relationship with the middle two generations. If the relationship is strong, then great-grandparents are likely to see their great-grandchildren fairly often, although probably not as much as they saw their grandchildren. If this relationship is weak, then great-grandparents see their great-grandchildren one or two times a year on ritual occasions. This is true even if the great-grandchildren live close by.

With an increase of four-and five-generation families, grandparents are no longer the oldest generation. The role of great-grandparent is much more likely to involve truly old people in their 80's and 90's with young children. For various reasons, such as failing health and energy, great-grandparents are not directly involved in the daily lives of their great-grandchildren. Great-grandparenthood is important primarily for its emotional significance, especially as evidence of family continuity. Even when daily contact is not frequent, great-grandparents draw much emotional satisfaction from their role.

Whether these findings will hold true for all family types awaits further research. The results suggest some differences between middle-class families with high mobility and working-class families whose younger generations tend to be less mobile.

Residents of the retirement community are mostly middle-class people whose younger family members are widely scattered. If a son or daughter lives nearby, then contact with great-grandchildren is more likely. They see distant great-grandchildren only occasionally, sometimes less than once a year. A few have great-grandchildren they

have never seen.

People still living at home are likely to see local sets of great-grandchildren more frequently than the retirement community residents, sometimes several times a week. Even in families with frequent contact, the principle of mediated relationships still holds. These great-grandparents see their great-grandchildren when they are accompanied by their grandparents or parents. The elders also have very little direct responsibility for the welfare of great-grandchildren.

Implications of Multigenerational Families for Older People

This study supports the conclusion that families are finding the means to preserve lineal continuity but that social interaction is restricted between widely separated generations. With the addition of generations, families have evolved visiting and contact patterns and family record-keeping devices which keep the generations knowledgeable of each other. Multigenerational families do not necessarily mean more social contacts for elders. In fact, there may be even less as the middle generations are stretched to bridge the gap between the diverse generations.

While older people value their descendants as evidence of family continuity, their relationships with their own adult children are still of primary importance to them emotionally and socially. Contiguous generations (parent/child) will continue to be the most relevant to each other. Relationships to successive generations depend on the strength of these relationships. The strong ties developed in families of procreation will continue to be older people's main reference point in an evolving multigenerational kinship system.

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